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Researching Chinese Students' Intercultural Communication Experiences in Higher Education: Researcher and Participant Reflexivity

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ABSTRACT

While much has been written about researcher reflexivity in ethnographic studies, discussion of participant reflexivity is a more neglected area. Further, the relationality that exists between researcher and participants and ethical issues vis-à-vis interviewing practices and consent also impact the overall authenticity of the data gathered and research outcomes. This chapter draws on the reflexive insights from both the researcher and participants as together they explore participants' intercultural communication experiences as international student sojourners. Holmes discusses the complex role she shared with her Chinese international student sojourn participants during an 18-month data collection period, and gathered in a post-data collection interview. The analysis reveals several themes that highlight researcher and participant reflexivity and impact the research outcomes: participants' motivation towards the research, researcher/participant relationality in terms of trust and power, ethical issues concerning data interpretation, and language. The analysis points to the importance of acknowledging reflexive processes, relationality, and four key research spaces in ethnographic/qualitative research.

KEY WORDS/PHRASES

Relationality - who is present, the function and purpose of the relationships in the research, and how these emergent relationships are constructed and negotiated, both interculturally and in terms of language choices.

Linguistic agency - the privileging of certain languages over others in an encounter; often entailing face negotiation, since what language interlocutors use indicates their relative statuses (of the languages and of the users themselves), and their assumptions about these differences.

Researcher identity – that which the researcher avows; that which the participant ascribes to the researcher; identities are challenged, (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in intercultural communication throughout the research process.

Lifeworld – the new world of knowing and sense making that participants enter into with the researcher.

Verstehen – understanding and knowing (by the researcher) the participant's own perspective.

Phenomenology – the study of the world of everyday life [that] is the scene and also the object of our actions and interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Qualitative research, in particular, ethnographic research, is a personal undertaking for both researcher and researched as they engage in fieldwork together. Jointly they must negotiate the research context, the focus and topic of the research, the processes by which data are generated (e.g., through interactions between researcher and researched), and how each comes to know and understand the other as knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation is constructed. When multiple languages and intercultural communication are a part of the researcher/researched dynamic, these processes become all the more complex.

Researchers must negotiate the multiple languages in use in the research site and communicate the purpose and focus of the research, often in language(s) unfamiliar to either researcher and/or researched.

In this chapter my purpose is to show how the researcher and participants reflexively shape and are shaped by the research process and focus through their intercultural communication with one another, and in a language they do not share. I revisit my own doctoral work - the intercultural communication experiences of 13 ethnic¹ Chinese students in a New Zealand university context - to re-examine my own researcher relationality and positionality vis-à-vis the participants, how we each managed intercultural communication in the research process, and the emergent challenges participants faced in having to use English in the research site. I draw on data neither published nor included in my doctoral thesis as, at the time, such data was not considered to be important in the thesis. Yet I was interested in knowing how my study was shaping participants' understandings in relation to both the research site and to me—the researcher. I explore how participants made sense of their relationship with and to me, the researcher, and the research topic. I discuss their reflexive and reflective recounts of their research experiences as knowledge generators and as intercultural communicators, and their emotional and cognitive responses to the research, all in a language which was not their native language - English. In post-researcher reflection, I too, take a reflexive stance, focusing on what methodological and ethical issues I faced in managing the sampling, data collection, and writing up, and how my encounters with these participants impacted the research process and the data generated.

REFLEXIVITY IN THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

In describing my understanding of reflexivity, I align my position with that of the editors: reflexivity can be seen as “a multi-faceted, complex, and on-going dialogical process, which is continually evolving” (see the introduction to the volume). Two aspects of the research

¹ I use the term “ethnic” here to indicate that participants did not all share a Chinese national identity, but links to one another through shared Chinese languages, and to some extent, shared ideas about what constitutes Chineseness.

process emerge as important: first, relationality; and second, the multilingual/intercultural spaces the research occupies.

The first aspect, concerning relationality, explores who is involved, the function and purpose of the relationships in the research, and how these emergent relationships are constructed and negotiated, both interculturally and in terms of language choices. Research (especially ethnographic) may involve shared relationships with any of the following: supervisors, participants, sometimes translators and transcribers, examiners, funders and publishers. Managing these relationships involves linguistic agency, the privileging of certain languages over others - in my research, English over the multiple languages spoken by my participants. It also involves negotiating trust, ethics, power, and face, and addressing questions of who may enter the discourse, who speaks for whom, and how, when and where (Krog, 2011). Where language is concerned, Scollon, Scollon and Jones (2012) note that language choice is also a matter of participants' face negotiation, since what language they use indicates their relative statuses, and their assumptions about these differences. The identities presented by those in the research also need to be negotiated. The identity I attempt to avow as I interact with participants may not be the one they ascribe to me, or that I wish to have ascribed to me (Collier, 2005). Identities are challenged, and thus, (re)constructed and (re)negotiated in intercultural communication throughout the research process. Thus, ethnographic research becomes an ongoing process of relationship building between the researcher and the researched.

The second aspect concerns the spaces of the research. Davcheva and Fay (2012) identified four research spaces that influence the construction of the research outcome(s). These include i) the research phenomena under investigation (in this study, the intercultural communication experiences of international ethnic Chinese students in the academic and social context of a New Zealand university); ii) the research context (here, the classroom and social spaces on

the university campus); iii) the research resources, e.g., the language and communicative resources of researchers (me, a doctoral researcher) and researched (the international ethnic Chinese students); and iv) the representational possibilities (e.g., how the linguistic resources and intercultural communication experiences of participants and researcher are understood, constructed, and represented in the writing up, in this case, of the doctoral thesis for examination at a university that accepts theses in English and Maori). Researchers need to develop awareness of these relational processes, and intertwining and overlapping spaces as they engage in multilingual, intercultural research (Holmes, Fay, Andrews, & Attia, 2013).

Through these relational and intercultural communicative processes, and within and beyond these representational spaces, the researcher and participants make sense of the research focus as they address the research questions, thus allowing “knowledge” to emerge. Yet, in this relational and dialogic activity of “making” research, the intersubjectivities of the researcher and participants are also being shaped. While the research activity can profoundly affect researchers’ sense of the world and themselves Canagarajah (1996), so too can it profoundly affect the participants understanding of their life-world and their place in it. By responding to an invitation to participate in the research, the participants enter into a new world of knowing and sense making with the researcher. My questioning prompted participants to think about their experience of living and studying, as ethnic Chinese students, in a New Zealand university. It also prompted me to think about how I should and do engage with the participants in ways that are ethical and appropriate, given our developing relationship and the research spaces we all occupy.

My research is framed by phenomenology which is concerned with “the world of everyday life [that] is the scene and also the object of our actions and interactions” (Schutz 1973: 209). Schutz posited an intersubjective world, experienced and interpreted by others previously, and now open to our experience and interpretation. Thus, meaning is particular and peculiar

to individuals in the spaces they occupy as they construct and reconstruct social groupings. This focus means that the researcher must account for (i) the individual meanings that participants bring to the intercultural encounter, meanings that are socially constructed through communication with others, and (ii) the multiple realities and identities that the participants construct and inhabit. Thus, knowledge is the result of each individual's unique experience, constructed in communication with others - and with the researcher. It is the researcher's task to come to know and understand the actors' own perspective (Weber's *verstehen*). Reflexivity, and individuals' reflections or critical inspection of the unfolding of the research and what happens in the research spaces (Holmes et al. 2013), make this sense making possible. Yet Altheide and Johnson (2011: 592) remind us that this knowledge is incomplete, implicit, and tacit:

Our subjects always know more than they can tell us, usually even more than they allow us to see; likewise, we often know far more than we can articulate. ... [T]he key issue is not to capture the informant's voice, but to elucidate the experience that is implicated by the subjects in the context of their activities as they perform them, and as they are understood by the ethnographer.

It is this coming to know that requires the researcher's active involvement of the sense making going on throughout the research process. Here I present participants' recounts of not only being researched, but of becoming someone other through their intercultural communication with me, the researcher. The self and other are not separate but always in relation (or in dialogue) and situated (Hall, 1997). Self-reflexivity in my study is somewhere between Boas and Malinowski's understanding of the *native's* point of view, that is, of immersing oneself in the world of the native (Geertz, 1983), and that of Bourdieu, where researchers must take into account the effects of their own position, and their own set of

internalised structures (or *habitus*), and how these might influence their sense making (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

These theoretical positions lead me to the following research questions which I seek to answer by revisiting my participants' understandings of the research process:

R.Q. 1: How do I, as researcher, reflexively engage with the research and participants?

R.Q. 2: How do participants reflexively engage in the research (that is, how do they (re)construct and (re)negotiate their relationship with the researcher and research focus as a result of the research experience)?

R.Q. 3: What ethical and relational issues emerge between researcher and participants in the spaces of the research?

To address these questions I now turn to my doctoral research. Although undertaken nearly 20 years ago, I revisit the researcher/participant experience with a criticality and intentionality.

THE RELATIONALITY AND POSITIONALITY BETWEEN RESEARCHER AND RESEARCHED IN THE STUDY

My positionality as researcher

As a researcher then I was not encouraged to interrogate relationality between researcher and participants, and the reflexive experiences of each as engendered by the research processes and outcomes. I was required by my supervisor to “report” my “findings” drawing on themes that illustrated rich, complex, common, and unique experiences, in common with standard approaches to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity was a section I was required to include in my methodology, to show my “examined” relationship between my research subjects and myself and the responsibility that that entails, for example, “why we interrogate what we do, what we choose not to report, how we frame our data, on whom we

shed our scholarly gaze, who is protected and not protected as we do our work” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, & Wong, 2000: 123). I also had to “bracket” my own experience, that is, to “provide autobiographical or personal information” that somehow served “to establish and assert [my] authority” to produce a text about the participants’ experiences (Fine et al. 2000: 109). One of my supervisors validated my interest in the research. He believed that because, earlier, I had lived in China for a year as teacher and had undertaken a short intensive course in Mandarin, because I had then lived in Hong Kong a further three years as an English-language-teacher educator, and because I also had experience of tutoring and supporting international students in the School where the research was being undertaken, I was therefore satisfactorily positioned to undertake this research. I recall being shocked at that time at my supervisor’s affirmation of my positionality and implied “authority” in relation to the research site. At the time I felt quite ill-equipped—in my knowledge of the other—to engage with these students, interpret, make sense of, and write up their experiences.

The participants’ positionality

The study itself included an 18-month data collection of 13 ethnic Chinese students’ intercultural communication experiences in a New Zealand university and the local community. The study focused on these students’ everyday socially constructed intercultural interactions (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and was underpinned by naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) which included observation, interviews, and informal meetings, and ethnographic description and interpretation (Van Maanen, 1988). At that time all international students needed a minimum 5.5 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or equivalent TOEFL. The criteria for participant selection were that participants had been educated in a Chinese language (e.g., Mandarin or Cantonese) and had come from countries that had systems of Chinese education (e.g., China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Taiwan). Participants’ profiles varied: seven were under-graduates, two were

graduate-diploma students, and four were graduate students. Six were female and seven male. All had been educated in Mandarin Chinese, except for the one Hong Kong participant who had been educated in Cantonese. Some of the other participants spoke Cantonese, and many spoke other languages as their mother-tongue or additional languages. Four of the undergraduates had come from a high school in their home country and then undergone six to 12 months of language and/or university foundation study in New Zealand. Two Chinese Malaysians (WK and FO) were part of a cross-institutional twinning programme, and had therefore already completed two years of their degree in their home (private Chinese) university. One of the two diploma students (KZ) was a direct-entry student from China with no language or learning experience in New Zealand. All the four graduate students were mature students, on government scholarships, and had completed their first degrees in China. These four had all undergone work experience in Chinese universities and were married. They had also completed a one-year diploma in the School.

Their profiles already indicate a disparate group of individuals, speaking multiple languages beyond the English language context of the research, yet tied, more tenuously, by my assumption that they shared an ethnic Chinese identity.

ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

I realised early on in this study that I would need to build relationships with my participants. It would not be possible to invite them to my office for an extended interview, present them with a consent form to sign, explain ethical procedures of the right to withdraw, anonymity, and confidentiality, and expect them to answer my probing and deeply personal questions about how they were feeling as international sojourners, the nature of their intercultural communication experiences, and how they felt about them. This phenomenologically-informed inquiry, I knew from my former experiences in China and Hong Kong, would require strong interpersonal relations between us. I would need to build trust before I could

expect to engage with participants. Therefore, I spent many hours in the research domain, especially in the initial months, meeting informally with participants on campus, inviting them to my home, and taking them on trips in an effort to establish friendship and trust. This seemed entirely appropriate to me at the time, and it was therefore a taken-for-granted action and one I did not think to explain to participants at the time, although on reflection, it would have been ethically appropriate to do so. I recall the emotional effort required to make phone calls (the research preceded the pre-social media era) to arrange meetings, etc. I was intruding upon their life worlds; yet I was bound to them in order for my research to happen - an inverse power relationship of which, I suspect, they were unaware.

The participants discussed the importance of relationship building. For example, mid-way in the research, WK explained his early reservation in interactions with me: “Don’t take much notice of what I said in the first few months”. And at the end of the research process another participant commented: “The more we talk, the more I can know your personality . . . so I know you will not do some harm to me and so I can trust you” (KZ). Therefore, not just prolonged engagement in the field, but careful relationship building was an important aspect of the data collection process. To this end, I became known as “the Godmother” by the other Malaysian/Chinese friends and classmates of WK and FO. Just as Frame (Chapter 1) mentions the importance of participants’ need to develop self preservation and identity strategies and to adopt strategic “orientations” to their relationships with others, so did the participants in my study seem to exhibit these strategies as they sought to understand and negotiate their relationship with me, the researcher.

I spent observation periods of approximately one month in classrooms at the beginning and end of each of the three semesters (over the 18-month data-collection period). These, along with informal discussions with participants in the research context and during social occasions, contributed to the construction of the in-depth interview protocols. In this sense,

the participants were very much involved in the development and construction of the research process. Each participant was interviewed three times, and each interview lasted more or less 90 minutes. In total, I spent approximately 62 hours formally interviewing participants and about 500 hours in fieldwork. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed (amounting to 15-25 pages of typescript for each participant). Extensive field notes and memoranda documented the ethnographic observations. These hand-written notes were recorded in an exercise book which became full over the study period.

POST-RESEARCHER REFLECTIONS ON THESE PROCEDURES

No qualitative inquiry is value-free (Lincoln, 1990). The data collection process enabled an exploration of participants' lifeworlds by drawing on and constructing meaning from data that are grounded and emergent in the social interaction of the participants (Glaser, 1992; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and in gaining a "thick description" (Geertz, 1983) of these students' encounters with others in the context in which communication is occurring. I drew on interview transcriptions and observations to identify both the shared and idiosyncratic experiences expressed by the participants in their intercultural communication with others. As much as possible, I wanted to preserve and give voice to their tellings as constructed in the context of the communication encounter and in accordance with the principles of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln, 1990). Like Najar's work (in Chapter 9), I was interested in what she describes as a "methodological assemblage", a method that allows the researcher to focus on the concrete practices and journeys of the participants in their everyday lifeworlds and environments.

Yet in trying to be faithful to these procedures, I omitted important participant reflexivity that the participants shared with me at the end of the final interview concerning their own relationship to me, the researcher, and to the research phenomenon under investigation. I make an attempt to address that reflexivity in one of my publications on this study:

My position as a New Zealand researcher meant that the data interpretation reflected to some degree the predispositions and parameters of a Western research tradition, as well as my knowledge of the research domain. As a doctoral student, a former teaching assistant in the school, an older student, and the occupant of an office with a computer, I may have been perceived by the participants as holding a position of power. On the other hand, developing an empathy with the graduate student participants, at least, was facilitated by commonalities in our life experiences. (Holmes, 2005: 296)

This explanation acknowledges that researcher-researched reflexivity, the complexity of that dialogic engagement, and the spaces it entailed; but that experience is left unexamined, hanging.

Further, in my doctoral research, and in my subsequent publications, I make no mention of the challenges in conducting research with participants who do not have the language of the researcher, or the research context: English. I realised that the research focus, and the interview questions, required participants to engage in complex cognitive and affective processes in English. Yet I did not include any discussion of the multilingual dimension of my research, and the challenges and possibilities that this might bring, or participants' competence in English. To date, I am not entirely sure of how many languages the participants brought to the research context, although I know many had regional and local dialects and other languages that they spoke with their families; nor did I explore their experience of using English, the language of the researcher, to report their experiences. How did they deconstruct their interview experiences with me—either intrapersonally, or with the other participants and friends? What possibilities may have arisen if I had considered the multilingual nature of the research? What if I had privileged focus groups (rather than one-to-

one interviews), where participants might have shared their experiences in and through shared languages in a shared sense-making process (Hesse-Biber, 2012)?

Instead, as interviewer, I centralised my own role in the research, as the “interrogator” who directed and controlled the topics of conversation through my already scripted “open-ended” interview protocol, and through my prompting; I was privileging what got discussed, when, and how (Fine, et al, 2000; Krog, 2011; Piller, 2011). Yet, ironically, in undertaking the data collection task that I draw on in this chapter, I was also acknowledging the importance of collaborative reflection between researcher and participants (as discussed by Pérez-Milans and Soto in Chapter 10) as a form of critical transformation (in my case, of self as researcher). Further, in privileging English throughout the data collection process and in choosing the interview as the key data collection instrument, I had, unwittingly marginalised the participants’ voices in hitherto unforeseen and unimagined ways. My recent investigation of multilingual processes in research methodology (Holmes, Fay, Andrews, and Attia, 2013, forthcoming) through the AHRC-funded “Researching Multilingually” project (<http://researchingmultilingually.com/>) has enabled me to realise, confront and make sense of my own biases and predispositions, and acknowledge the challenges of conducting intercultural bi/multilingual research. I have become more aware, through this post-study reflection, of the multi-dimensional, heterogeneous nature of language(s) as researcher and researched engage in intercultural encounters in interviews and field research. What further insights might have emerged if I had afforded participants the opportunity to discuss their experiences with one another first in an informal focus group and in the languages of their choice, and then later, share their constructions with me (Ganassin & Holmes, 2013)?

As noted earlier, ironically, in closing my data collection, I included in the final interview a section on participant reflexivity which has permitted me here to engage in post-reflexive analysis, and also to return to the data to present an in-depth analysis of this reflexive

relationality and positionality of participants - vis-à-vis the research and researcher.

Following Braun and Clark's (2006) thematic analysis guidelines, I analysed solicited reflections on the research process and research topic by looking for common themes and multiple as well as singular instances of phenomena in the interview data. I also drew on communicative exchanges recorded in my researcher journal that I had had with participants in the field throughout the research period.

PARTICIPANT REFLEXIVITY VIS-À-VIS THE RESEARCH AND THE RESEARCHER

Several major themes emerge from this analysis. At the time of writing up the study, these themes seemed extraneous to the purpose of the study and so were omitted. Yet they allude to the importance of researcher reflexivity in intercultural ethnographic research. They include: participants' motivation for participating in the research; how participants experienced relationship building and trust with the researcher; power; the ethics of data interpretation; language; and participant reflexivity.

Motivation for participating in the research

Participants chose to engage in the research for several reasons. They wanted to practise their English; some remarked that the interviews with me were their only source of contact with a local person outside of their international student social group. They wanted to make friends with a New Zealander, learn more about New Zealand, and to find out what the researcher wanted to know about the participants. YR (female pg) wanted to learn about research processes: "I learned how to ask questions, how to make a rapport with the interviewees from you", and this entailed her behaving responsibly at my requests for interviews, even though she at times did not feel committed to the research goals: "I should be cooperative, whatever difficulty I had, so that is why I never refused you . . . but I thought, oh, maybe waste my

time”. FO (male ug), and a classmate of WK (male ug), was motivated by WK’s decision to participate. In FO’s eyes, WK demonstrated enthusiasm to push himself out from the group, to engage in new experiences, and so FO was guided by this thinking. Conversely, M, a female first year undergraduate student, who had done a one-year preliminary language course, explained why she failed to answer my emails and phone calls at the outset when I was contacting potential participants. In this post-analysis interview at the end of the data collection period, she explained that she did not want to come, or to participate in recorded interviews because she felt that, as a young student in her first year of study, that she would have nothing to tell me; in other words, she felt that she was an unfit informant. Here she thanked me for taking care of her. Had I been aware of their motivations I could have acknowledged their unique needs and contributions in how they perceived the data and their role in developing the study, and the meaning and importance of the study from their perspectives. However, these important reflections are missing in the implications section of the final chapter of my thesis.

Relationship building and trust

My experiences of living and working with Chinese people made me aware of the importance of building trust with my participants, but I did not realise that this trust was critical in gathering *authentic* data, as this post-analysis revealed: “Initial data might not be very accurate because we were . . . self-conscious, getting the right answers for you” (WK, male ug). So in this case, WK felt that he should tell me things that put him, and perhaps my own research, in a positive light. He confided informally “Don’t take too much notice of what I said in the first six months”. This shocked me at the time, as it does now. I had “collected” all that data, analysed and written it up, and perhaps it was useless! Perhaps I should have gone back to the initial data and rechecked it with the participants!

LJ talked of the importance of coming to know the other through communication and of the value of shared similarities and discovered meeting points:

I don't think there are some very [...] effect or difference in our culture, but I think it's try that I feel much better and better when I communicate with you. Yeah, I mean, much more comfortable. When I first talk with you, probably because of my language problem, probably we don't know each other, you know, but today you can understand, get a far insight of my thought. You understand me now, to some extent. It's getting better and better. (LJ male pg)

Sharing the experience of his newborn was one example. I visited LJ and his wife and gave a gift. I did this as an act of friendship and in recognition of the momentous occasion signalled by the arrival of a newborn. I had stepped out of my researcher role here. LJ felt that events like this, beyond the interview, helped to build trust within the interview. He made a comparison with China in that such behaviour would be similar. Other participants expressed trust in terms of the need for self-protection against emotional harm:

The more we talk, the more I can . . . know your personality. The most important thing is the personality, so I know you will not do some harm to me and so I can trust you." (KZ male pg).

So like slowly, your influence, that I don't need to be afraid of you. . . . When I first came here I don't trust you. (WK male ug)

YR spoke more in terms of reciprocity between researcher and researched: "I think the researcher should be act as friends to the person being research[ed], that's one thing, and show concern for him or her. . . . Once you get trust from him or from her you can get the information" (YR female pg).

Yet, not all participants engaged with me in such a constructive way. With V (male ug) I felt I was struggling throughout the research to elicit his feelings and experiences. In the post-research reflection interview he concluded: “I’ve been here almost three year, so all of my feeling is the same I think”, and of my questions over the 18 months: “Sometimes it’s very boring. You ask me the same question, and I answer you the same answer as well, similar answer. I told you already” (V). My doctoral thesis had less of V’s voice in the findings, but on reflection, what was lost by this lack of engagement with and commitment to the research? The research and interviews were some kind of abstraction, not an activity of interaction and sharing for V. I therefore had to rely on others’ voices more for the data. I concluded that some relationships just don’t work.

Outside of the interview context, some participants reciprocated in this relationship building. Soon after the data collection I was invited to a neighbourhood barbecue where (local, international, and other Chinese) students and local families were present at a shared meal of neighbourhood friendliness. I recognised my own biases as I felt surprised at how this shy and quiet participant (M, female ug) was socially networked to her neighbourhood community in a way that I was not to my own neighbourhood.

Power

As much as I tried to minimise my own position, most participants perceived me as hierarchically superior to them: I had my own office, a computer, I was a doctoral student (not a master’s or undergraduate student), I had been a lecturer, I was older (in most cases), and a mother (with two young children at the time), and these were all markers of my power and status. I recall one female student who seemed quite willing to come to interviews, but while carrying out the data collection I was never exactly sure how seriously she engaged with my questions, or how comfortable she felt about participating. Yet in the following

exchange, through what she perceived as my kindness, she demonstrated that she had always been open to engagement:

AS: It's just good to have a meeting time, lecturer, like you.

ME: I'm a student.

AS: No, you are lecturer before, so it's a good experience I think [for her to communicate with me, a "lecturer"]. . . . As I told you, I do well in this research and you try to look after all the research participants very well I think. Contact very well, and especially the dinner [I invited a group of them to my house], is unforgettable.

And then she went on to tell me, after eating lasagne at my house, about the challenges she faced in trying to make her own lasagne. And we laughed and shared tribulations about lasagne making. Why were these mundane everyday details in which informants "tell" their lives, so important in ethnographic research, missing in my write up?

However, I had to work at minimising this power distance: I had to show empathy and understanding of the challenges participants faced as students and sojourners. SX (male pg), who a couple of years after the research became my partner at Bridge (the card game), spoke of how, through my interviewing approach and fieldwork, I encouraged his engagement in the research, which concomitantly, encouraged his growing interest and commitment:

At first, when you talked with me and I think, oh, you are a lecturer or you, I mean, you've got a high position, and I, yeah, I should I mean to follow you at every aspect.

But gradually, gradually, I mean, yeah, this, I mean, something has been changed and now I mean, I know what's what I say at first I think I'm just a passive, passive role, and finally, I know actually both of us are ... creating, yeah, so it's different. (SX male pg)

Here SX demonstrates a post-research critical self awareness of his own agency in the shaping and emergence of the research data.

Participants' ethical concerns about data interpretation

Linked to issues of trust and power are participants' ethical concerns about presentation of the data. By way of member checking, I returned the interviews I had transcribed myself to each participant to check. I also passed the findings chapters from the thesis to two postgraduate participants to read so they could check my interpretations and discussion of data.

Participants expressed concerns about the accuracy of my understanding and interpretation of their experiences and backgrounds, and ethical issues in reporting the data. Their comments indicate their own self-determination in the research process. One participant wanted to make sure that delicate matters discussed regarding his/her political positioning at the time of the Tiananmen Square situation in 1989 was not reported in the data. Another was concerned about how I would report his/her accounts of his/her intercultural/learning experiences in one of his/her classes. The class was taught by my supervisor who would then read about the episode in my thesis. A third was concerned about how I might misrepresent Chinese culture in my write up:

I'm quite interested in what you are thinking and doing and also I am...I want to give you some help . . . because, you know, the culture is very complicated thing. . . .

Although you stayed in China or in Hong Kong for some, for a few years, but maybe I think you're not very well understand. You're not well understand about the culture in China, but I think the understanding of the culture is quite important in your research. So I think if I know what you are thinking and you are doing, maybe something I know, maybe you are not right, so I can tell you. (KZ male ug)

KZ explained that he had read books written by famous Western authors on Chinese values and culture, "but they don't really understand some simple things". KZ's candid account

suggests that the authority invested in me by my supervisors at the outset had always been open to question. And a fourth, AS (female ug), felt that the research itself was important because it enabled her to find out what international students are saying and thinking, and that others too could learn from it. She acknowledged the political nature of the research - that it gave participants the opportunity to voice their lived experiences of internationalisation and student mobility, perhaps outside of what they perceived as institutional constraints and pressures (such as the routine of preparing for and attending lectures and seminars, and assessment), all of which have the effect of silencing them.

Aside from demonstrating the importance of member checking, participants' feedback here indicates how they perceive the research as a political endeavour - where their voices are heard and represented, and where the construction and representation of the research is a truly co-collaborative endeavour (Collier, 2005; Pérez-Milans & Soto, Chapter 10 in this volume). Yet, I now question whether I called on these voices and their positioning sufficiently throughout the fieldwork, analysis, and write up.

Language

The multilingual research practices at play impact the ways in which meaning is constructed and negotiated between researcher and participants (Andrews, Holmes, & Fay, 2013). The participants used complex cognitive and affective processes in describing and narrating their experiences. For example, they negotiated expression of perceptions and emotional experiences in English; the researcher-researched relationship, which included deference to the researcher in some instances and participant agency in others; presentational strategies of the self (Goffman, 1969); and face strategies (Brown and Levinson, 1978). They were also negotiating the meaning of the interview questions vis-à-vis the research topic and aims, and the importance and significance of their own narratives and responses in meeting these aims. (For an analysis of the ways in which language learners mobilise their language resources

multimodally to understand the transformations they experience see Chapter 6 by Evan Nelson and Malinowski.)

My interview questions asked them to consider concepts like culture, values, social experience, communicative phenomena, and affective responses to encounters and interactions - not an easy task! FX (female ug) explained how the process worked:

“Sometimes I can’t understand and can’t express my idea exactly, but you can explain me and let me know what you want, are thinking, and what you want to know”. In other words, the multiple languaging techniques and strategies (recasting, reformulating, repeating) I use as a researcher to convey the meaning of my questions helps participants to understand their meaning and intent. However, this interpretative process raised challenges which they expressed in multiple ways:

I’m quite [a] slow thinker, I mean, I need time to think of the question. If interview straight away the question, I sometimes, when I, the answer that I give, [I] have to justify or change later when I think more about it. Or I might have something to add. (AS female ug)

I don’t like to have interview because I feel uncomfortable, you know, because I have to speak English. ... Sometime we have interview, I have, I don’t understand. I think that difficult question also good for me, to think about it. (M female ug)

In responding to questions about communication experiences, SX (male pg) reported that he knew the words in Chinese but could not find the words in English. FX (female pg) explained that some of the language in the interviews, e.g., words like “values”, although easily translated into Chinese, she had not necessarily thought about; words like “community”, a strange concept to her in Chinese, and “intercultural communication” were unfamiliar and not easily translated. This uncertainty of the meaning of words caused her to question the quality

of her responses. And YR (female pg), sighing in exasperation, commented: “This question is quite abstract now!” For M (female ug), even the thought of having her voice recorded on a dictaphone was scary to her.

As a researcher, I too was negotiating language (word choice, sentence structure). I was also negotiating my relationship with participants, aware (I thought) of power issues, and the need to establish empathy and trust. Like all researchers, I share the concern of eliciting responses that contribute to the research objectives, but simultaneously acknowledging participants’ asymmetrical communicative competence when using other languages (Ganassin and Holmes, 2013).

The influence of the interview experience on participants as international student sojourners

For me, the most revealing aspect of the post-reflection interview was how the participants had reflexively engaged with the interviews and research focus, an engagement I had been unaware of during the data collection. My questioning had prompted them to reflect on and make sense of their intercultural communication experiences with other students, teachers, and administrators in the university, and people in the community, and even, in LJ’s case, their reasons for choosing to study overseas:

You has given me some information how to communicate with the other people. It’s what I did not think before we made this programme. And after you talk with me about this question of course it forced me to thought about that, to think about that. (SX male pg)

Some questions I never thought about it, and when you ask me and I will start thinking about, yeah, it’s a kind of self value...I quite enjoying this sort of self-evaluation. (KZ male pg)

I never think about, what about the value of my culture and what happen, because it's, I think it is very natural. I never think about the value, cultural value, in New Zealand, how they influence me. After the interview I think about this question. This is my first time to think about it.” (M female ug)

Through this interview I can clear my mind and I'm thinking, “Why I'm different from the other people, and why I come here?” and I can explain to you and I can also explain to myself as well. . . I can show my idea. I get feedback about my idea from another person. That's what I like. (LJ male pg)

And WK explained that having to think about the interview questions over the three iterations encouraged him to think about everyday encounters, the mundane of ethnographic details; whereas once he would not stop to consider or question these things, his participation in the research encouraged him to reflect more:

It makes me think whether I value [whether] coming here [to the interview] has had any impact on my life or not. . . . Initially, [it was] just like [an] obligation because I agreed, but now I feel it's a contribution, it is a sort of pleasure, no[t] to say it's a pleasure, but it's good. I don't mind, I like it. (WK male ug)

CONCLUSIONS

This post-researcher reflection and the recounts of the research participants in this study suggest complexities, hitherto unrecognised by myself as researcher, that need to be addressed in the data collection process and writing up of ethnographic research. Further, the analysis indicates that ethnographic intercultural/multilingual research does more than just generate knowledge: it can be a valuable, informative, formative, and cathartic experience for the researcher and participants as they each reflect on the research process and its implications for their life experiences and identities. And these reflections need to be written

into all stages of the ethnographic account. More importantly, the discussion sheds deeper insights into how knowledge is constructed in the ethnographic endeavour. The outcomes of this analysis have implications for researchers and their research praxis.

First, in this study participants' motivations for engaging in the research emerged in various ways. I realised that their motivations could influence their engagement in the field, and for some, this changed over time - from uncertainty and reluctance, to catharsis, to an acknowledgement of the need for and value of the research. However, other reasons for engagement I had not foreseen. In the case of at least one participant, e.g., V, perhaps his role was one of obligation, having signed up to participate. This situation raises ethical issues of the validity of consent forms, and indirectly, the quality and authenticity of the emergent data.

Second, my post-research interviews illustrated to me the extent to which the participants engaged in reflexivity, which in turn, led them to deeper understandings of their role and importance in the purpose and construction of the research. For example, they became aware of and began to explore a self that was in the becoming as they made sense of who they were through the research focus and in the research site. Through the research they were also able to critically reflect on and make sense of their intercultural communication experiences and international student sojourn. Furthermore, they demonstrated an agency in constructing the research through their intercultural interactions with me, for example, in deciding what information they would reveal to me, when and how. This power-broker role is usually assigned to the researcher. In my initial analysis I had not fully acknowledged the ways in which these participants reflexively experienced and managed the research process - and me, as the researcher - and thus, these insights were omitted from my construction of their intercultural experiences in the write up.

Third, the researcher is responsible for building relationships and trust with participants, as cultural informants, to ensure that the data is authentic and trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Ethical processes - beyond the use of consent forms and requirements of anonymity and the right to refuse to answer questions or withdraw from the study at any time - include a responsibility for the well-being and protection of participants' identities and experiences in the research site and an ethics of reporting: for example, what I should and should not disclose, and the accuracy of my understanding and interpretation. Further, participants described the need to come to know the researcher first before projecting and exposing their inner selves. I was unaware of the ways in which they were exercising agency and power in their understanding of the research and in its unfolding. Had I been aware, I may have been able to explore this complexity further and its implications for their experiences and the research findings and outcomes.

Fourth, researchers, whether they are monolingual or working in their first language which is unshared by the participants, need to show sensitivity towards and be flexible about participants' language needs in the data collection process. Participants had to explain in English affective, cognitive, and behavioural aspects of their intercultural communication encounters. Deploying abstract terms like "culture", "values" etc. raises issues not only of translatability, but also processes of sense making which resulted in participants developing a deeper self awareness of their identities as they worked back and forth between the selves in their home countries and the selves they were creating through this research experience.

Fifth, the analysis highlights the "outsider" position I inhabited. There is the need for researcher sensitivity in acknowledging the multiple interpretations participants ascribe to the research focus and process, and how these diverse meanings contribute to the overall research outcomes. Through my questioning in interviews, and through my engagement with the participants in the field, they began to make sense of their intercultural encounters and

(re)construct and (re)negotiate their multiple identities – as friends, international student sojourners, as inhabitants of a particular country, and as belonging to certain groups with whom they may or may not share values. My perceptions of their identities and their multilingual/intercultural selves were shrouded by own researcher identity - of “doing” research and “being” a researcher. Therefore, researchers need to look beyond textual and thematic analysis of data - the words in the interview transcripts and researchers’ treatment of them - for the meanings embodied in participants’ reflexive experiences, and how these insights might enrich and complement more traditional contextual and thematic analyses presented as “findings” in the writing up of research.

Finally, this post-researcher reflection and analysis has illustrated to me that reflexivity needs to include the reflexivity of both the researcher and the researched, to acknowledge the important role of the relationality that exists between them, and to recognise researcher and researched agency in determining what gets reported by whom, how, and when. These aspects can be interpreted via the four research spaces outlined at the outset: 1) the research phenomenon under investigation, in this case, the international sojourn, and the ways in which researcher and participants make sense of it; 2) how researcher and researched build understanding of their research context; 3) how they make use of the language resources in their interactions and the extent to which these resources can generate knowledge and understanding; and 4) in representation of the research outcomes, the choices the researcher makes in consultation with the participants about what is included and excluded. As researchers engage with participants in their intercultural encounters, they need to be open to and investigate not just their own, but also the participants’ reflexive positions and lifeworlds and how they contribute to the construction of knowledge. The blind spots I have exposed here in my own understanding will hopefully guide me, and perhaps other researchers,

towards a more dependable and authentic engagement with others and otherness in future intercultural and multilingual research endeavours.

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